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O 271452Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1734
INFO RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI IMMEDIATE 0366
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 0338

UNCLAS KHARTOUM 001304

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CAIRO FOR LEGAT

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON HIGHJACKING OF SUDANESE AIRCRAFT TO LIBYA

REF: KHARTOUM 1301

¶1. (SBU) As of 1500 local time, media reports indicted that the highjackers had released the reported 95 passengers from Sudanese Sun Air 737 aircraft diverted to Kufra, Libya, (reftel,) but continued to hold the crew hostage. The highjackers were said to be demanding fuel to fly the craft to Europe. No group has claimed responsibility for the highjacking.

¶2. (SBU) On August 27 poloffs met with Murtada Hassan Gumaa, Commercial and Executive Director of Sun Air, which operated the domestic Nylala to Khartoum flight. (Note: The passengers were released several hours after the meeting. End Note.) Gumaa stated that while he has had no direct contact with the crew, he had spoken with the Libyan authorities on site at Kufra airfield. Gumaa, who spent over two decades in aviation in the United Arab Emirates before returning to Sudan within the past year, said the Libyans have been helpful. He expressed confidence in their handling of the highjacking. "They are determined to resolve this situation on the ground," he said, and to that end they have refused to refuel the hijacked plane. He continued that the Libyan negotiator is experienced and well-versed in crisis situations. He noted that Sun Air had advised Libyan authorities to seek a peaceful solution and avoid the use of force at all costs. "The safety of the passengers and the aircraft itself is paramount," he said, noting that Sun Air is the only reliable commercial service in and out of Darfur.

¶3. (SBU) When asked about the circumstances surrounding the hijacking, Gumaa stated that the responsibility for pre-boarding screening and airport security measures rests with Sudan's Civil Aviation Authority. He stated that Sun Air does not have the authority to search passengers or luggage. But as a result of this incident, Sun Air already has prepared a letter to the Civil Aviation Authority requesting permission to take responsibility for security screening, he said. Gumaa lamented that Sudanese airports generally have lax security, with numerous unguarded or unsecured areas. Following this event, however, he said he expected corrective action would be taken by civil aviation authorities to address these deficiencies, noting that changes were already being implemented. Passengers on a Sun Air flight to Juba the morning following the hijacking were subjected to rigorous screening and identification checks, he said. He expressed confidence in the capabilities of the Civil Aviation Authority, characterizing its current leadership as receptive and flexible. (Note: Wholesale changes were made in the leadership of Sudan's CAA, following the tragic fire aboard a Sudan Air aircraft on landing at the Khartoum Airport that took the lives of 30 people in June. End note.) The current CAA head also comes from the aviation field, he said, while his predecessor did not.

¶4. (U) Post will continue to provide updates on this incident, including the affiliation and motivations of the hijackers, as information becomes available.

ASQUINO